

Jason and the Elusive Lady

By Valma Clark

HIS Aunt Enid is fond of telling a childish anecdote on Jason: how she sent him into the garden to gather flowers for her very special dinner-party; how Jason simply walked by the gorgeous red peonies and the bland pink roses, and returned, hours later, with a bunch of poor little elfin wild columbines squeezed tight in his hand.

His Aunt Enid might have learned something about Jason from the incident, but Mrs. Selby-Smith was too busy and too modern, too deeply occupied with the sophistications of Ibsen and Shaw, to make subtle deductions about her perfectly normal young nephew.

II

JASON had spent the day alone in the open. He had seen one blue heron, one doe, and two porcupines, and for several hours he had lain on his back on a couch of sun-warmed, fragrant pine-needles, and had watched the gulls wheel overhead.

When the sun was a crimson balloon hanging low over the western waters of Georgian Bay, he sighed, faced about, and paddled home, through devious little island channels, to his aunt and her guests. His beloved cedar canoe shot forward and swerved to the Selby-Smith dock in a perfect landing; and Jason stepped reluctantly back into tame civilization.

For Aunt Enid had built herself an Italian villa in a spot that called for a log cabin. She had sprinkled pergolas and things about, and had made orthodox vines grow where nothing but blueberries and wild cranberries and poison-ivy ever

grew before. In short, Aunt Enid had turned a heap of rocks surrounded by water into a pretty little garden, and had quite effectively screened out the wild Canadian scenery beyond.

Jason sometimes wondered why Aunt Enid came North to sit in a basket-chair, when she could just as well sit in a basket-chair at home, if she'd only stop long enough.

But this evening, as he climbed to his own room and got out of his khaki breeches and into his white flannels and drifted down to the living-room, he was wondering chiefly what these new guests would be like. There was a girl, he remembered, faintly hopeful.

"Ah, Jason!" Aunt Enid hailed him. "I was hoping for a word with you."

He lit a cigarette and slouched obediently over to her.

"It's about the Kirwans. Kitty Kirwan is a delightful child. I want you to be nice to her, Jason." With her lorgnette she tapped his arm for emphasis. "She's criticized at home, you understand. Mothers of swaggering girls, and mothers of choppy-stepping girls, frown upon Kitty's hip movement when she walks across a room. 'You shall not sway your hips,' they say. Nonsense! As well tell the breezes not to blow! Kitty is really very charming. She has a little manner—a poise and finish all her own. She has more real culture back of her than any other girl in that younger set; her mother is musical, you know, and her father reads voraciously. Kitty herself has a very pretty little talent—plays, has composed a little, writes occasional verse. She

promises well. She's artistic, and a wee bit original, I suspect. And she's romantic, Jason; like a girl from a story-book, you know, all a-tingle for the big adventure—the romance around the corner—"

"If she's counting on *me* to play the lead to her Big Adventure!" muttered Jason darkly. Already he hated the girl.

"Kitty is one of my enthusiasms, you perceive," Aunt Enid finished with a smile, having summed up the girl to her own satisfaction at least. "You must like her, Jason. They'll be down any minute. . . ."

But the faint hope in Jason had turned up its toes and died. He knew the type—pretty little girls that his aunt was always bringing around. They played sweetly and danced lightly; and when mamma's back was turned, they sometimes puffed at a cigarette too daintily or said "Damn" or did the littlest shimmy—and thought themselves very rash and reckless. Invariably they wore organdy—usually *white* organdy.

Jason loathed organdy; the sheerness of it that dares, and the stiffness of it that forbids and wilts down as though it's been poisoned if you so much as touch it. Not for nothing had Jason spent three college years in a metropolis and looked in on musical comedies and Bohemia!

Wherefore Jason got to his feet and eyed Kitty Kirwan without interest. So he *was* right, even to the white organdy. He mumbled "How-dye-do?" and took the girl's cool hand. This one wasn't even very pretty, he noted; slim and tall, with dark hair combed back from a rather colorless small face.

Dinner was interminably long. Aunt Enid and Mrs. Kirwan finished Oscar Wilde and the Van Wyck divorce and *Main Street* and Mrs. Brady's atrocious new stucco house. Matsu pad-padded back and forth.

Through the open window, Jason

watched a round moon floating high above the pine tips of the island opposite, and caught the glint of water, palely gold, very still. He squirmed.

"It's a fairy barge!" chuckled the girl beside him.

Jason stared. Clearly she was referring to the mint leaf floating in her lemonade.

Rot! But he relented toward her somewhat. She had none of the pretensions of the accomplished sweet young thing. She was a mere child.

When presently a stray gnat got into the lemonade and drowned there, and she shuddered and pushed the glass away as any fool girl would, instead of fishing it out sensibly and finishing off her lemonade, his dislike of her turned definitely to tolerant contempt.

At coffee, he condescended to smile upon her. She was drinking her coffee so eagerly that you could tell she hadn't been long graduated from nursery porridge.

"Do you want *yours*?" she asked him greedily under her breath; and when Jason said no, she sneaked it so surreptitiously that he laughed outright.

Her face, he discovered, with its pointed chin and its frame of dark hair curving backward from a point in the middle of her forehead, was heart-shaped. She had a funny kid way of wrinkling up her nose and making quick little grimaces.

"You *like* coffee?" he inquired with some interest.

"No. It's nasty, bitter stuff. I like the way it makes you feel." That sounded promising. She glanced sideways at Jason. Was there, or was there not, a dancing something back of her eyes? But she looked down at her plate again, and her profile was so quiet and demure that Jason decided there was not.

"Talented—romantic—a little poise and finish all her own," Aunt Enid had said.

And then Kitty Kirwan turned to him

and made her one contribution: "I adore peppermint squashes, don't you?"

"Peppermint squashes?"

"You know. You screw a peppermint-stick into a lemon and then suck the lemon juice through it. It's sour sweetness—makes your mouth ache, like teary laughter makes your heart ache."

"Peppermint squash! 'Poise and finish! My eye!'" Jason did not utter the exclamations aloud. But he sat there and looked at Kitty Kirwan in her white organdy, and saw instead dainty blonde Aline of the "Fairies' Frolic"—Aline in daring black satin, pert and deliciously slangy, smiling at him over the rim of a champagne glass. And Jason turned again to the moon.

However, he saw what his Aunt Enid had meant, when after dinner the girl put on her drawing-room manner and sat herself down at the piano and played for them. Jason edged toward the door.

"Do 'Love's a Flower,' Kitty," commanded Mrs. Kirwan. "A little thing of Galsworthy's—the air is Kitty's."

She struck the opening chords, and noiselessly Jason bolted. On the veranda he paused a moment. The girl was singing in a not unpleasant voice that had little lilt and unevennesses in it:

*"Love's the rhyme of a summer minute
Woven close like hum of flies;
Sob of wind, and meaning in it
Dies away, as summer dies.
Love's a shimmery morning bubble—"*

Not bad, that! The sorrowful cynicism of it rather appealed to Jason's youth. But if he was going to make his getaway—

Jason crept silently down to the dock and his waiting canoe.

III

HOURS later Jason drifted moodily down a silver stream between purple splotches that were islands. He guessed that he was

a long way from home, but he was giving Aunt Enid time to get off for the night before he returned.

The canoe slid gently into shadow and a spruce branch swept his face. Well, tomorrow he'd clear out—a camping trip up the French River. He'd have the devil of a time with Aunt Enid of course. Aunt Enid had good taste about some things, but when it came to girls —

Cradled there, stretched out in the curving bottom of his canoe, his head pillowed against his bunched-up sweater, wrapped about by the warmth of the night and the odor of balsam, Jason must have slept.

When he awoke, stiff and rather damp with dew, the moon was setting. He pulled himself up with the feeling that someone had spoken to him.

"Moonlady, Moonlady!" The voice of a girl, lyric, whimsical, came out of the black heart of the shadows before him. "The round moon is your yellow hair, cropped close like a boy's. The black filigree of the pines is your black lace shawl and the silver water is your spreading silk train. The white birches yonder are your slender white fingers. Go to sleep, O Moonlady! Pouf!" Suddenly she broke out whistling a rollicking rag-time, and Jason, peering into the night, saw the prow of a canoe move out from the shore into the dim light.

She was almost quite past him before Jason found his voice. "Hello!"

"Oh!"

"Did I give you a start?"

"I—I— Where are you?"

"I'm over here."

"Oh!"

"A whistling woman and a crowing hen'—how does it go? I say, that's a wrong start, isn't it? I'm only trying to be clever," Jason explained.

She lingered, trailing her paddle, a shadowy figure at the stern of the other canoe.

"Where are you going?" he tried again.

"Oh, drifting—just drifting. I can't see you," she complained.

"No? I'll come out. We might have drifted together. They drove *me* away from home. Silly little simpleton of a girl!"

"You too?" she sighed. "Such a stupid prig of a boy! The mater will be giving me Old Harry."

"Jove, that's a funny thing—both of us! Look here, who are you?" he demanded suddenly. "I don't remember any camps close."

"Perhaps I'm a dryad and live in a tree. Dryads do live in trees, don't they?"

"Do you come from over Shawanaga way?"

"Perhaps."

"But, good heavens! That's a clean six miles!"

"Yes?" — indifferently. "Well, I'm bound to catch it anyhow, so there's no hurry."

"You've a nice voice," murmured Jason tentatively.

"Do you think so?" The girl laughed softly.

"I say, I've got to see you! I've a box of matches here. If I light a match and show myself, will you do the same?"

"Hm."

The match flared. The girl made a little indeterminate exclamation.

"Fair," she said, after a moment's silence. "Rather young, though . . . I wonder if he doesn't take himself a bit too seriously."

"Now!" He reached her the matches.

She weighed the box in one slim hand—suddenly laughed and tossed it overboard.

"You cheat!" he charged hotly, grasping the side of her canoe.

"Let go. I must hurry and swim before the moon goes quite down." She slid away from him; was swallowed by the shadows. Came a sharp scraping against

rocks, a muttered "Bother!" a prolonged crackling of brush, and the girl stood out on the pale cliff above him.

"My suit is red satin and my cap is yellow, and I look like a gypsy—only nicer," she teased, and stood poised on her toes, her arms pointed over her head.

"But Lucifer, you're not going to dive from there! Do you know what's below?"

"I'm not sure." And she dove clean, making the least splash.

Jason, clutching the two sides of his canoe, dug his nails into the wood.

But her voice reassured him: "You see, it was all right."

He breathed again. The little fool! But she was none of your namby-pamby parlor maidens . . . a little dare-devil . . . a slim athlete. . . .

"Your name," he hazarded abruptly, "would be Zoe—or—or Caprice. Wouldn't it?"

"I like Satinka better."

"Satinka?"

"It's Indian for *Magic Dancer*."

"Do you dance, too?"

"I'll do the dance of the fireflies, shall I?"

"Please. Only wait." Jason caught hold of a spruce bough, stepped precariously onto a rocky ledge of the island, pulled his canoe half out of the water, and climbed to her.

The girl stooped for something, and danced away from him.

"Where are you?" he cried.

A spot of light answered him, was gone—a pocket flashlight, he guessed. It was a game then! He darted after her.

"Here!" she mocked him; from quite a different direction, came the firefly glimmer. He plunged after her, stepped off into a cleft in the rocks, scrambled up again.

Jason caught the zest of the chase. He skinned his knees, and his face was bleeding from a scratch, and the wonder of it

was that he didn't break his leg; but his heart was racing, and he was unconscious of anything but that maddening, elusive voice of hers and the tingling of his own hot blood in his veins.

Her laughter bubbled up at his very elbow; her breath was on his cheek; he grasped—and caught the air. By heaven, he would get her yet!

She had Aline stopped, this strange girl; Aline only played at being a fairy sprite in a cooked up fairy ring under a spotlight; this girl *was* a fairy with the whimsical mind of a fairy.

At last he swerved and stumbled over her, a laughing, choking little heap. He found her wrists, twisted the pocket light from her. "I've *got* to see your face," he panted, "because I think I'm—falling for you—and how can a fellow fall for a girl without—a face?"

With one arm he held her tight to him, while the fingers of his free hand felt over the flashlight for the button; found it. Jason chuckled—a triumphant little gurgle of laughter—and tilted up her chin.

But somehow, at that moment, she eeled away from him, eluded him entirely. Jason

was after her again, swearing softly; she was down there on the ledge by the water.

But she was too quick for him. He heard the swish of the prow and the slap of the stern as she pushed off in a running leap.

The moon was down and it was suddenly very dark; he could just make out the moving shape of her canoe. Her derisive laughter floated back to him. The night was still—just the receding splash of her paddle.

Then, far out on the water, the girl began to sing, and the thread of her song trailed back to Jason, faint, provocative:

*"Love's the rhyme of a summer minute
Woven close like hum of flies;
Sob of wind, and meaning in it
Dies away, as summer dies.
Love's a shimmery morning bubble—"*

The truth of it hit Jason squarely between the eyes; the direction of the expiring song was his own Aunt Enid's sleeping Italian villa.

Jason sat down suddenly on a patch of harsh, sun-baked moss. "Good Lord!" he breathed.

